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SOUTH AFRICA: Nuclear Weapons Program Disclosed

President de Klerk yesterday announced details of South Africa's clandestine nuclear weapons program in a bid to end international and domestic scrutiny of the issue. (b)(3)

De Klerk told the legislature that between 1974 and 1989 South Africa had assembled six of seven planned nuclear weapons for deterrent purposes but had decided to dismantle them in 1990 because of reduced regional threats. He said Pretoria would continue to adhere to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and invited the International Atomic Energy Agency, which received advance notice of the announcement, to send inspectors to verify South Africa's claims. De Klerk denied that South Africa had ever conducted a secret nuclear test or cooperated with other countries on weapons technology. The ANC welcomed de Klerk's disclosures and Pretoria's reaffirmation of the NPT but called for more details, particularly on alleged South African cooperation with other countries. (b)(3)

Comment: De Klerk undoubtedly hopes to resolve the lingering questions about South Africa's nuclear weapons program before he enters a power-sharing arrangement with the ANC and other parties, possibly as early as next year. Although the NPT does not require Pretoria to reveal its past nuclear activities, a combination of press reports and international and domestic scrutiny probably forced de Klerk's hand. The announcement nonetheless appears to be a good-faith effort to come clean on some major aspects of the weapons program without revealing others (b)(1)

De Klerk's denial of participation in a secret nuclear test undoubtedly referred to reports that one was conducted in 1979 in the South Atlantic (b)(3)

De Klerk's admission alone is not likely to quiet the controversy over past and present nuclear activities. Even though initial domestic reaction has been favorable and the international response is likely to be so as well, the ANC will continue to seek additional details. Many South African blacks may still fear that whites would use nuclear weapons against them in the event of a race war. (b)(3)

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